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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Tiny Wife**

Written by Andrew Kauffman

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*The Tiny Wife*

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# BOOK ONE

# 1.



**T**he robbery was not without consequences. The consequences were the point of the robbery. It was never about money. The thief didn't even ask for any. That it happened in a bank was incidental. It could have just as easily happened in a train station or a high school or the Musée d'Orsay. It has in the past and it will in the future, and shortly after 3 p.m. on Wednesday 21st February it happened inside Branch #117 of the British Bank of North America.

The bank was located at the corner of Christie and Dupont in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada. There were thirteen people inside when the thief entered: two tellers, the assistant manager, and ten customers waiting in line. The thief wore a flamboyant purple hat and brandished a handgun. Having a flair for drama, he fired a single shot into the ceiling. Bits of plaster fell from the it got caught in the fake fur fibers of his hat. Everyone was quiet. Nobody moved.

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‘While this is a robbery ...’ the thief said. His accent was thick and British, the kind that makes North Americans feel slightly ashamed. He flicked his head and a cloud of plaster dust swept into the air. ‘I demand only one thing from each of you and it is this: the item currently in your possession which holds the most sentimental value.’



## THE TINY WIFE

With a wave of his gun the thief directed the bank personnel to come around the counter and get into the line where the customers waited. At the front of this line stood David Bishop, a penguinesque man of forty-five, who trembled slightly as the thief came so close that the brim of his purple hat brushed against David's bangs.



'Well?' asked the thief.

David reached inside his jacket, removed his wallet, and pulled out several hundred dollars.

'You expect me to believe that money is the object currently in your possession holding the most sentimental value?'

David Bishop became confused. He continued to hold the bills high in the air. The thief placed his gun against the man's left temple.

'What is your name?' the thief demanded.

'David. David Bishop.'

'David David Bishop, rip the money into little pieces and throw the pieces into the air.'

Pausing briefly, David did as the thief demanded. Pieces of money fell to the floor.

'Now, David, think. You have a lot riding on this. What is the most significant, memory-laden, gushingly sentimental object currently in your possession?'

David Bishop pointed to a cheap-looking watch on his wrist.

'Convince me.'

'My mother gave it to me – years ago, when I left for university. I've just gotten it fixed and started wearing it again.'

'Now that's more like it!' the thief exclaimed. He took his gun from David Bishop's head and the watch from his wrist. 'Now go over there and lie on the floor.'

David Bishop complied.

With a wave of his gun the thief directed the next person in line to step forward. Her name was Jenna Jacob.



## THE TINY WIFE

In her right hand were two diamond earrings. She put these in her pocket, searched through her purse, and removed two wrinkled photographs.

‘Very cute,’ the thief said. ‘How old?’

‘Ten and thirteen.’

‘You will never be more aware of how much you love them than right now.’

Jenna Jacob nodded and, without being asked, joined David Bishop face down on the floor.

My wife was next in line. I wasn’t there, of course, but she told me this story so many times, told me all these stories so many times, and with such rich and inclusive detail, that I not only feel as if I was there, but I’ve even begun to believe it. I remember how Stacey straightened her posture before stepping forward.

‘You look so much like my brother,’ she said. This was true. The thief had the same crook at the bridge of his nose, and pale blue eyes that spoke of both arrogance and desperation.

‘Sorry, but that doesn’t exempt you.’

‘You know, you don’t have to do this.’

‘Maybe. But, more likely, I do.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘Does it make you happy?’

‘It gives me meaning.’

My wife nodded and then fished around in her purse and pulled out a calculator.

I was using this in my second-year *Calculus of Several Variables* class when the man who’d become my husband

sat down beside me. I used it to help him with his homework. Much later I used it to figure out the night we got pregnant, and the day I'd give birth. I used it to calculate our mortgage and whether we could afford a second car or a second kid. There has not been an important decision in my life that I've made without it,' she said.

All these things were true. That calculator really was the object that held the most emotional significance for her. It went beyond the things she figured out with it – my wife loved math. It made sense to her. It made the world make sense to her.

She sighed deeply as she put the calculator in the thief's outstretched hand. 'Any way I can get it back?' she asked.

'I'm afraid not. How long?'

'I got it in first year.'

'No, your husband.'

'Seven years.'

'And you still love him?'

'I think so.'

'Kids?'

'Just one.'

The thief nodded. He waved his gun, and Stacey joined the others lying face down on the floor.

The thief worked through the rest of the line. Daniel James gave him his wife's parents' wedding photo, which he'd been taking to get restored. Jennifer Layone gave him a dog-eared copy of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. Sam Livingstone, the assistant manager, who'd stood last in line, handed over the paystub from his recent promotion.

## THE TINY WIFE

When he'd collected an item from everyone in the room, the thief backed toward the door. At the exit, he paused.

'Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please,' he said. No one got up, but everyone raised his or her head. 'It has come to my attention that the vast majority of you, if you even believe you have a soul, believe it sits inside you like a brick of gold.


'But I'm here to tell you that nothing could be further from the truth. Your soul is a living, breathing, organic thing. No different than your heart or your legs. And just like your heart keeps your blood oxygenated and your legs keep you moving around, your soul gives you the ability to do amazing, beautiful things.

'But it's a strange machine, constantly needing to be rejuvenated. Normally, this happens simply by the doing of these things, like a car battery recharging by driving.'

The thief stopped, put his arm into his sleeve, and sneezed. 'Excuse me,' he said. He looked at his watch. 'I'm really using a lot of metaphors today. Listen, I'm in a bit of a rush, so let me conclude. When I leave here, I will be taking 51 percent of your souls with me. This will have strange and bizarre consequences in your lives. But more importantly, and I mean this quite literally, learn how to grow them back, or you will die.'

The bank was quiet. The thief threw his hat into the air and was through the doors before it landed on the floor.

## 2.



**T**he first manifestation began six hours later for Timothy Blaker, who'd stood seventh in line, four behind my wife. He was twenty-seven years old and worked as a bus driver. The object he had given the thief was an engagement ring, one he happened to have been eager to get rid of. He'd been carrying the ring for seventeen months, since the night Nancy Templeman, his girlfriend of two and a half years, had refused to accept it.

Timothy had not seen her or talked with her since the night of his failed proposal, so when he opened the doors two stops east of Shaw on College and she stepped inside, he was surprised to see her. Nancy extended her hand but did not deposit change – instead, she reached into his chest and pulled out his heart. She held it in front of him. He watched it beat. The bus continued to idle as he watched her run back down the steps and into a waiting yellow Ford Mustang.

## THE TINY WIFE

Nancy stepped on the gas, the back tires producing much sound and smoke. Timothy Blaker gave chase.

The bus did not corner as well as the muscle car, but, having no heart, Timothy drove fearlessly and managed to stay on her tail. The passengers stayed in their seats, watching with fear as all their stops went by. They were underneath the Gardner Expressway, heading east on Lakeshore, when he pulled up beside her. They raced neck and neck. They ran many red lights, but at Lawrence Street cement trucks gridlocked the intersection and they were forced to stop. Many of the passengers stood, alarmed, but their fear remained too great for any of them to venture toward the front of the bus.

Timothy opened the doors. The cement trucks cleared the intersection. The light turned green and he jumped, landing with a metallic thud on the hood of the Mustang.

Timothy looked through the windshield. He could see his heart on the passenger seat. He watched it beat. He saw her jerk the steering wheel to the left and the right. He felt himself get thrown violently around. The tips of his fingers ached, but he held tighter and tighter, and then she slammed on the brakes.

Timothy was thrown from the hood of the car and landed on the asphalt. Three backward somersaults later he came to a stop.

He was bleeding from his elbow. There was a large cut just below his eye. He jumped up and a sickening pain went through his right leg. The Mustang was three hundred feet away and pointed toward him. He looked at

Nancy. She looked at him. He heard the engine rev. The back tires squealed.

Timothy did not move. The yellow 1964 Mustang sped forward. It was a hundred meters away, and then it was fifty, and then it was twenty. He did not move or shut his eyes. He stood there, watching it approach. This standing, this not flinching, made him feel strong. The closer the car came, the greater danger he was in, the stronger not flinching made him feel. It came closer and closer. Timothy continued to stand his ground and, with less than ten feet between him and the front bumper of the Mustang, she again hit the brakes. The car stopped with sudden force. His heart was thrown from the passenger seat. It burst through the windshield, leaving a heart-shaped hole in the glass, and flew directly into his chest.